

On Stage, 'The Exorcist' Lacks the Movie's Chills

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Body

LONDON -- Midway through the West End premiere of the laborious sound and light show "The Exorcist," I kept returning to one question: What's the point? Sure, plays have been fashioned from films many times before, and "The Exorcist" was a best-selling creep-out of a novel by William Peter Blatty before it ever became an era-defining shocker on screen in 1973.

But the movie remains so associated with Linda Blair's head spinning around, as the possessed 12-year-old Regan she is playing battles a demon within, that it seems a fool's errand to transcribe this particular title to the stage. The stage adaptation by John Pielmeier is at the Phoenix Theater through March 10 under the direction of Sean Mathias. Unbilled but very much aurally onboard is Mr. Mathias's frequent colleague and onetime romantic partner Ian McKellen, the great actor-knight who can be heard voicing the infernal rumblings that course within forlorn, sweet-natured Regan (played by a game Clare Louise Connolly).

The story is more or less unchanged. As before, the film actress Chris MacNeil (a chic Jenny Seagrove) is in Washington, D.C., to shoot a movie and can't immediately account for why it is that her daughter is suddenly urinating on the floor in public; she later adds projectile vomit to her list of unanticipated party tricks. Along come two priests, Fathers Karras (Adam Garcia) and Merrin (Peter Bowles), whose tussle with Satan results in the spiritual eviction promised by the title. One assumes that the illusion designer, Ben Hart, was kept busy, as the composer and sound designer Adam Cork has certainly been: The play begins with a clamorous bang but tails off to a whimper.

There's nothing supernatural to explain away the climate of fear and anxiety in "Glengarry Glen Ross," the David Mamet play in revival at the Playhouse Theater through Feb. 3. The dread here comes from the naturally cutthroat capacity of humankind, as borne out by a group of real estate employees whose livelihoods are on the line.

Mr. Mamet's play won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize and is widely considered his masterpiece, due in no small measure to its singular command of language (no expletive is wasted or ill-timed). London has long flown its own flag for the play. "Glengarry" had its world premiere in 1983 at the National Theater, and it gets revived here roughly once a decade; the director Sam Yates's current production marks the play's fourth London airing and also, just possibly, its breeziest.

That's not necessarily a good thing given the feral intensity of the text. The first act consists of three short, sharp duologues set in a Chinese restaurant followed after the intermission by a longer second act that brings all the men together amid the melee of the office where they are all busy chasing leads. You want to feel the pressure continually being applied, whether by that master huckster Richard Roma (Christian Slater, inheriting the role played in the 1992 film by Al Pacino) or by his older colleague Shelly "The Machine" Levene (Stanley Townsend), who will say anything if it allows him to close the deal on properties soon revealed to be worthless.

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The presence these days of an American president who glories in deal-making guarantees the relevance of a play in which people exist solely as prey, and allegiances can turn on an informant's dime. All the more reason therefore to wish for a greater sense of cunning and attack from a cast, the two principals in particular.

Mr. Slater, best known for his work onscreen, has appeared twice before on the West End and has an outsize gregariousness that suits the role. What's missing is the chill that lies just beneath the charm, once Roma realizes that he is as much victim as perpetrator of the same hardscrabble ways in which he is so well schooled. Mr. Townsend, in turn, could amplify the desperation leading Levene toward a cash windfall, a set of steak knives -- or complete oblivion. (At one point at the matinee attended, it looked as if the two men were trying to keep one another from laughing.)

Far more attuned to the bruising affect of the writing is Kris Marshall as an office manager, at once inscrutable and implacable, who won't be swayed from the task at hand. Robert Glenister is especially good as the most bigoted of these con men, not to mention the one who looks forward late in the first act to the possibility of violence. For that fleeting moment, the sense of danger simmering within this play flares unforgettably to life.

Those wanting a bit of warmth and maybe even catharsis from their theater can beat a path to the Other Palace and the London premiere of "Big Fish," the Broadway musical by Andrew Lippa (music and lyrics) and John August (book) that called it quits late in 2013 only to resurface here in a greatly scaled-down production that values heart over scenic razzmatazz and succeeds in jerking a tear or two.

"Big Fish," like "The Exorcist," also has a celluloid forebear -- the 2003 Tim Burton film, starring Ewan McGregor and Albert Finney. But both the film and the stage musical share as their source a 1998 novel by Daniel Wallace about a son's relationship with a his father, who is revealed to be far more than the extravagant teller of tall tales that his son has always taken his dad to be.

As on Broadway, this latest "Big Fish" devotes copious time (some may think too much) to the various products of the aging Edward Bloom's fantastical mind -- a mermaid, a witch and a hirsute giant included. The estimable director Nigel Harman, himself an Olivier Award-winning actor, is wise, though, to keep returning the focus to the gradual reckoning between the generations that makes for a tremulous finish, the structure in this case helped by splitting the elder Bloom into two parts: his bedridden, dying self (Kelsey Grammer) and his so-called Story Edward self (Jamie Muscato). In New York, the protean Norbert Leo Butz played the entirety of the character, an Alabama native from a town so small that its phone book is a singular "Yellow Page."

The London production's obvious big fish in casting terms is TV's "Frasier" himself, the ever-winning Mr. Grammer, as a father whose love for his family becomes as apparent as his gift for elaboration. And even when the songs stoop to drearily pro forma paeans to daffodils, the score is exceptionally well served by Mr. Muscato, Clare Burt as Edward's eternally devoted wife, and the clarion-voiced Matthew Seadon-Young as the son, Will, drawn to "bone-dry facts" who discovers not a moment too soon a welcome new world of feeling.

The Exorcist. Directed by Sean Mathias. Phoenix Theater, through March 10. Glengarry Glen Ross. Directed by Sam Yates. Playhouse Theater, through Feb. 3. Big Fish The Musical. Directed by Nigel Harman. The Other Palace, through Dec. 31.

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